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DEPARTMENT FOR CA

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TAGS: [CVIS](#) [PREL](#) [EZ](#)  
SUBJECT: CZECH REPUBLIC: BCWG MEETING ON THE VISA ROADMAP

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¶1. (SBU) Summary: The U.S.-Czech Bilateral Consular Working Group (BCWG) met May 11 to discuss progress on the Visa Roadmap toward eventual membership in the U.S. Visa Waiver Program. The Czechs confirmed that all passports issued in September 2006 and after will contain biometric chips. They announced the launch of a public relations campaign, which will feature public statements made by leading Czech politicians urging Czechs not to overstay their visas. Emboffs explained planned improvements in Prague visa application procedures and Embassy facilities. These changes should improve convenience and comfort, and shorten the wait time for obtaining a tourist visa. Emboffs also announced the launch of the 2005 baseline study of Czech overstays. Finally, the BCWG discussed minor irritants, including asymmetric Czech visa requirements for the adult children of U.S. diplomats, and the complaints of Czech visa applicants. End summary.

¶2. (SBU) Czech participants at the fifth BCWG meeting on May 11 included Lubos Novy, Director General of the MFA's Legal and Consular Section; Tomas Haisman, Director of Interior Ministry's Asylum and Migration Policy Department; and Ivana Holoubkova, Deputy Director of the MFA's Americas Department. Embassy participants included Michael Dodman, Acting DCM; Richard Appleton, Consul General; Mario Mequita, Deputy Consul General; Sean Joyce, Legal Attache; and Jan Krc, Information Officer. The meeting focused on Czech compliance with biometric passport requirements, Prague visa application procedures, Czech public diplomacy efforts, status of the 2005 baseline overstay study, Czech visa requirements for children of U.S. diplomats, and Czech visa applicant complaints.

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Biometrics  
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¶3. (U) The Czechs announced that all Czech passports issued after September 2006 will contain the required biometric chip. Fingerprints will be added to passports in 2008. Given the ten year validity of passports, it will take that long to fully phase in the new system.

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Czech Public Relations  
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¶4. (SBU) The Czechs launched a public relations campaign, which they claim will feature public statements made by high-ranking Czech officials urging Czechs not to overstay

their visas. For example, FM Cyril Svoboda is expected to make a public statement that urges visa compliance when he returns from his May 16 meeting with the Secretary and members of the U.S. Congress. Emboffs urged the MFA also to consider the following forms of public outreach: (1) correct all misstatements about U.S. visas in the local press, and (2) respond in writing to articles regularly published in the local press about Czechs who overstay their visas and work illegally in the U.S. (Note: Post has not seen any official statement on visa compliance in the press to date, and is somewhat skeptical of the efficacy of the Czech campaign. Post previously provided a draft print campaign to the Czechs to use, but FM Svoboda failed to approve it -- presumably because he believed it could have a negative impact on the upcoming national election in June. Post will urge the Czechs to reconsider using the proposed print campaign after the election. End note.)

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Visa Application Procedures  
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15. (SBU) The Czechs said they compared Embassy Prague's visa application procedures with those of other U.S. Embassies in the region, including Athens, Bratislava, Budapest, Nicosia, Riga, Tallinn and Warsaw. On the basis of this comparison, the Czechs concluded the application procedures of other embassies must be better than those of Embassy Prague, based on their claim that the Czech Republic currently has the longest wait for a visa in the region. (The Czechs claimed that as of the date of their comparison, the wait in the Czech Republic was nearly four weeks.)

16. (SBU) Emboffs explained procedures currently vary from post to post. Embassy Prague employs the application procedures recommended by the Department. These procedures were chosen to address post-specific problems identified in

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the past, such as long lines at the Embassy. While wait times in Prague -- normally less than a week -- are currently longer than at the posts listed above, Emboffs said the delay is temporary and is due to unexpected staffing shortages and a spike in the number of visa applications that mark the onset of the summer visa season. The Czechs seemed satisfied with Emboffs' explanations.

17. (U) Emboffs also said Embassy Prague will soon make changes to improve the convenience of applying for a visa. For example, the Embassy will implement new procedures, including the expansion of the current student application process to include journalists and preferred business travelers, and the option for Czech tourists to apply using the electronic visa application form (EVAF). (However, Emboffs cautioned that the EVAFs are not in Czech and will mean longer waits at the Embassy while applications are processed.) In addition, in fall 2006 Embassy Prague will have a larger waiting room, an additional vice consul, and two extra windows for interviewing applicants. These changes should permit the Embassy to schedule more visa appointments, which in turn should shorten the length of time between applying for and obtaining a visa.

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Overstay Study  
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18. (U) The Embassy has started the baseline study of 2005 Czech overstay rates as outlined by the Roadmap. Procedures for the study will be implemented in accordance with Department guidance. Emboff said the Embassy's previous study using 2004 data found a 3.5% overstay rate and noted the figure does not include a further 2% of Czech visitors who could not be located. Based on the 3.5% overstay rate, the Embassy is satisfied that adjudication in the Czech Republic is neither too strict nor too lax.

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Czech Visas for Kids of U.S. Diplomats  
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¶9. (SBU) Emboffs asked whether Czech visa requirements for the adult children of U.S. diplomats (ages 18 to 26) could be harmonized with U.S. requirements, which are more lenient. The Czechs claimed the current law cannot be changed, and applies equally to the children of all diplomats to the Czech Republic. Emboffs asked whether it would at least be possible to change the harsh requirement that U.S. adult children must first obtain admission to a Czech institution of higher education before they can obtain a visa. Czechs agreed to examine the issue.

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Czech Visa Applicant Complaints  
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¶10. (SBU) The Czechs said they have noticed a spike in the number of complaints about the U.S. visa application process. The complaints fall generally into two categories: (1) unhappy because didn't receive a visa, and/or (2) unhappy because experience at the Embassy was "humiliating." Emboffs noted the spike may be a result of the attention the visa issue has received in the local press in the run-up to the national election on June 2. Nevertheless, the Embassy takes complaints seriously, and investigates all of them to ensure fair and respectful treatment of all applicants, and an overall experience that is as pleasant as possible. ADCM Dodman emphasized that customer service is a top priority of Ambassador Cabannis because the experience of applying for a visa may be the first interaction a Czech citizen has with the United States. Emboffs urged the MFA to forward all serious complaints to the Embassy for investigation and appropriate follow-up.

¶11. (U) The meeting concluded with a warm farewell from Novy and the Czech delegates to departing CG Appleton. The next BCWG meeting will be scheduled in fall 2006 after the arrival of the Embassy's new Consul General.  
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